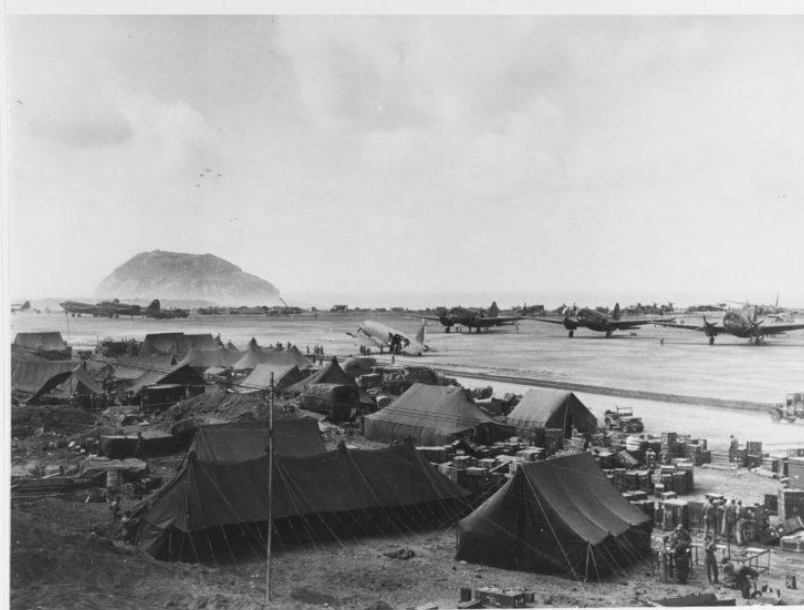




Ensign Jane Kendeigh, USN flight nurse, first to make wounded evacuation trip to Okinawa. Photo taken on landing strip with Marines during short layover at Okinawa. (National Archives and Records Administration Photo by C.J. Harleen)

THE WARTIME EXPERIENCES OF TWO WOMEN AT IWO JIMA AND OKINAWA

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A Douglas R4D transport plane (center) loads wounded Marines on Iwo Jima's South Airfield, for evacuation to a Navy hospital on Guam, in March 1945.

By [Richard Hulver, Ph.D.](#), Naval History and Heritage Command, Histories and Archives Division.

Twenty-two year old Ensign Jane “Candy” Kendeigh looked down on the battered island of [Iwo Jima](#) at daybreak on March 6, 1945 from a [Douglas R4D hospital transport](#) and watched ships of the U.S. Fifth Fleet bombard the narrow northern section of the island still held by the Japanese. Her plane circled for 90 minutes until it was safe to land.¹ A public affairs officer documenting the historic trip described “the bursting shells beneath us like firecrackers on the fourth of July,”² Kendeigh herself later recounted to a war correspondent that she “was quite apprehensive at that point.”³



Ens. Jane Kendeigh (left) at a press conference at NAS Honolulu with Lucy Jamison, of KSU Radio and Hazel Hartzog of United Press. (Photo from the collection of the National Archives and Records Administration)

As one of the Navy's 48 newly trained [flight nurses](#), her R4D from VRE-1 of the Naval Air Transport Service (NATS), Pacific was the first of the squadron to arrive at Iwo Jima for evacuation of stretcher cases to Guam, then Oahu or San Francisco if need be. With the bombardment over, the plane descended past Mount Suribachi and landed on Motoyama Airfield Number One, taxied to the hospital tent, and loaded wounded Americans. Despite being the second aircraft to depart Guam that morning, Ensign Kendeigh found out upon landing that hers was the first to arrive due to the first one getting lost en route. Thus, she became the first American female to reach the battlefield in the Pacific—or so she thought.



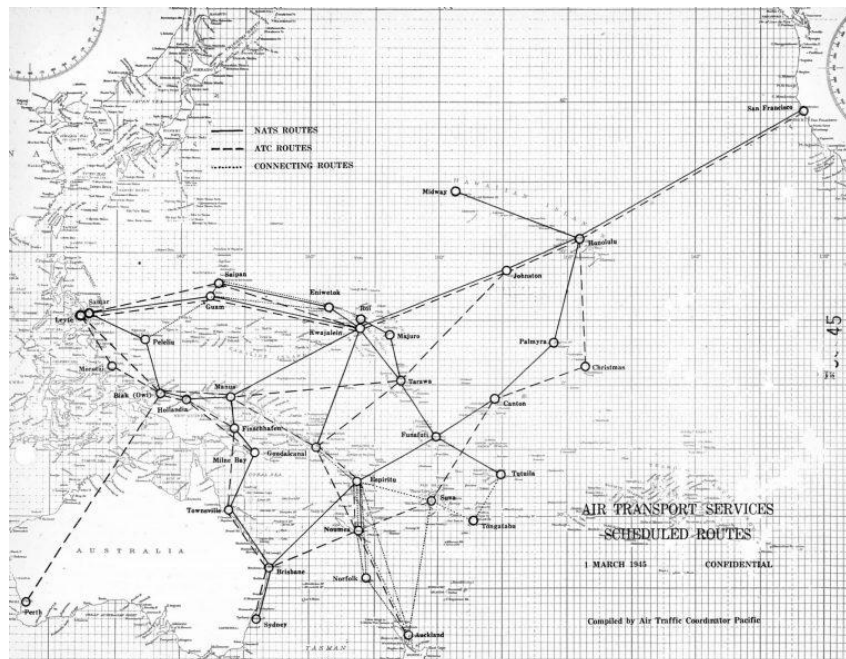
Time around the world is kept by these four clocks hanging in the correspondents' work room of the Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet public relations headquarters on Guam. Enjoying a cup of coffee are (left to right) Bruce Rae, New York Times; Barbara Finch, Reuters and Joseph Bors, International News Service. (Photo from the collection of the National Archives and Records Administration)

Navy War Correspondent Barbara Miller Finch of Reuters actually arrived on Iwo Jima in the days before Kendeigh on another plane from the inaugural VRE-1 evacuation run without any female flight nurses. Finch was not only the first American woman to land on Iwo Jima in wartime, but the first American reporter on the scene. The Navy prohibited female correspondents from entering into combat zones. In a story that she penned for the magazine *Shipmates*, Finch bemoaned that female reporters would never be able to tell their grandchildren “when I went ashore with the first wave,” but a loophole to the Navy’s policy was present. Female reporters were allowed travel in unarmed hospital ships and on board hospital planes if freight and patients on the flights to and from the combat zone afforded room for a passenger.⁴ By volunteering as a nurse’s aide on the first NATS flight into Iwo Jima, Finch broke new ground.

Finch first arrived on Iwo Jima in the VRE-1 plane *Peg O’My Heart*. This was the first plane from a land base to arrive following the end of the initial phase of combat on Iwo Jima—air evacuations were not allowed until March 2.⁵ Her arrival was not met with the American naval bombardment that Kendeigh witnessed. Instead, what she saw was enemy fire.

Once her plane landed on [Motoyama Airfield Number One](#) and the crew disembarked to screen wounded, Japanese artillery shells fired from the northern end of the island fell near the airstrip, forcing Finch and the crew to take cover under a radio Jeep.⁶ The plane promptly took off once the shelling stopped with no wounded as they could not risk moving them in the open should another barrage erupt. The dangers faced

in this mission, however, did not deter Finch from volunteering on future evacuation runs. She returned on March 6, the same day as Ensign Kendeigh's daybreak touchdown.



Map of NATS Routes from Command Semi-Monthly Newsletter, dated 1 April 1945. This map is reflective of February/March 1945 service, note that the routes to Iwo Jima and Okinawa are not yet established as the regular routes they will be as the American offensive advances in the following months. (Scanned from the collection of the Naval History and Heritage Command Archives)

NATS, Pacific typically flew six flights a day from Guam to the combat zone, with the capability of increasing to ten if advanced notice of need was provided. VRE-1 primarily flew Douglas [R5D](#)'s capable of carrying 36 wounded and R4D's (24 wounded). The medical personnel on the flights screened the Marine, Army, and Navy casualties in the forward areas and prioritized those in the most need. The work on the fifteen-plus hour flight proved grueling.

After being shaken up by the naval bombardment that welcomed her arrival at Iwo Jima, Kendeigh explained that "while we were on the island, I was too busy working on patients to be afraid" and that she was never "frightened at the time—only later, when [she] had time to think."⁷ Contemplation did not come on the eight hour flight back to Guam. The flight nurse, along with a pharmacist's mate, tended to wounds and administered aid to the wounded evacuees.



Ensign Jane Kendeigh, First Navy Flight nurse to reach Iwo Jima, tending to serious casualties awaiting evacuation on the air strip, March 1945. NHHHC Photo Collection, NH 95014.

Although often seriously wounded, many of the patients evacuated were in sound mental condition and had their spirits boosted with the prospect of being in a hospital bed by nightfall. Fifteen evacuees were on board Barbara Finch's March 6 return flight to Guam. Several of the young Marines on litters on board called her over for conversation. One read her a bloodstained letter from his girlfriend, and another who had lost his left leg awoke mid-flight and sought assurance from her that they were still moving.

Finch continued to volunteer on hospital planes to get to the front. Hers and Kendeigh's paths actually crossed on the first VRE-1 flight into Okinawa on L-Day plus 6, April 7.⁸ Finch was the correspondent aboard Kendeigh's flight to and from Okinawa, denying the flight nurse the sole claim as first female on Okinawa, but not preventing her from holding the claim as first female flight nurse on both Iwo Jima and Okinawa.



Percy and Barbara Finch of Reuters News Agency, one of the best known husband and wife war correspondent combinations, at the Commander in Chief Advanced Headquarters in Guam, Marianas, just before returning to the States on leave. (Photo by Jerome Zerbe from the collection of the National Archives and Records Administration)

Finch reported her perceptions of the flight, which carried 29 wounded Marines from the battlefield. A Marine with a compound fracture in his left arm and a bullet wound through his neck was the flight's most serious case. Ensign Kendeigh fed him through a tube on the flight to Guam. Finch was impressed that Kendeigh "found time for everything—to chat with men as well as watch temperatures, give sedatives, to change bandages."⁹ She even inspected the unexploded artillery shell that a Marine colonel fought doctors to allow him to carry on board the plane as a reminder that he was "living on borrowed time" because it did not explode after landing near him on the battlefield.¹⁰ When asked by war correspondents about Finch challenging her firsts, Kendeigh responded, "Mrs. Finch really gets around."¹¹

Finch was the first female war correspondent to receive credentials from the Navy in the war. Her first assignment covered a press conference with Pacific Fleet Commander [Admiral Chester W. Nimitz](#) at his headquarters in Honolulu.

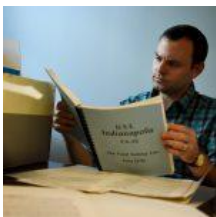
She established herself as a presence among the Pacific press corps. On V-E Day (May 8, 1945), she was granted the rare opportunity to board the submarine [Spadefish \(SS 411\)](#) while the boat lay moored alongside the tender [Proteus \(AS 19\)](#) in Apra Harbor, Guam following the end of her fourth successful war patrol on April 21, 1945. Up until this point in the war, the Navy had kept nearly all press away from submarines. Finch interviewed the crew about their experiences and was introduced to the Spadefish's mascot, a mutt named Luau, and the remainder of her recent brood of puppies still aboard (the others were dispersed to other boats and ships in the Fleet).¹²



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Following her participation in multiple successful evacuation flights from Iwo Jima, the Navy sent Kendeigh back to the United States to participate in War Bond drives. Between March 6-21, Kendeigh and her fellow flight nurses contributed to the evacuation of 2,293 American wounded from Iwo Jima.¹³ Kendeigh requested leave from the War Bond drive to return to the combat zone and arrived in time to be a part of the first flight into Okinawa. It was a point of pride for Kendeigh that neither she, nor any of her fellow flight nurses “lost a single patient in the air.”¹⁴

The front line experiences of both Jane Kendeigh and Barbara Miller Finch in the final stages of the war in the Pacific exemplified the outstanding professionalism, heroism, and service that more than 300,000 American women showed during the war. Both serve as reminders that, while not the primary combatants, women frequently placed themselves in harm’s way and witnessed, firsthand, the brutality of war. Throughout the conflict, American women proved themselves capable of excelling in a variety of jobs, many traditionally male-dominated, and aided greatly in the Allied victory.



Editor’s Note: Dr. Richard Hulver is a historian in the Histories and Archives Branch of Naval History and Heritage Command. He is leading a project to revisit the sinking of USS Indianapolis and make historic material readily available to the public and Navy that tells the whole story of the loss. Hulver received a B.A. in history from Shepherd

University and a Ph.D. from West Virginia University. Prior to joining the Naval History and Heritage Command he worked as a historian for United States Southern Command, the American Battle Monuments Commission, and was a part of the Army Chief-of-Staff’s Iraq War Study Group.

1. The Navy designated the Douglas C-47 *Skymaster* R4D and the Douglas C-54 *Skymaster* Both types were used by VRE-1.
2. Gill DeWitt, "A picture story of a flight to Iwo Jima by Lt. Gill DeWitt, USN". From the Admiral Nimitz Foundation, Fredericksburg, TX.
3. Laurie Johnston, "American Fighters on Okinawa Astounded by Sight of Pretty Navy Nurse on Plane," *The Honolulu Advertiser*, 21 April 1945.
4. Barbara Miller Finch, "Through Female Eyes," *Shipmates* (Vol. 8 No. 12), 74.
5. United States Fleet, *Amphibious Operations: Capture of Iwo Jima, 16 February to 16 March 1945* (Washington, DC: Navy Department, 17 July 1945), 1-10.
6. Ibid., 1-9 and *Shipmates*, 74.
7. Laurie Johnston, "American Fighters on Okinawa Astounded by Sight of Pretty Navy Nurse on Plane," *The Honolulu Advertiser*, 21 April 1945.
8. Finch reported that this flight took place on D plus eight in her December 1945 *Shipmates*
9. Barbara Miller Finch, "First U.S. Nurse Reaches Okinawa: Ensign Jane Kendeigh Also was First to Land on Iwo Jima to Aid Yank Wounded," *Wilmington Morning News*, 9 April 1945.
10. Barbara Miller Finch, "First U.S. Nurse Reaches Okinawa: Ensign Jane Kendeigh Also was First to Land on Iwo Jima to Aid Yank Wounded," *Wilmington Morning News*, 9 April 1945.
11. Laurie Johnston, "American Fighters on Okinawa Astounded by Sight of Pretty Navy Nurse on Plane," *The Honolulu Advertiser*, 21 April 1945
12. Barbara Miller Finch, "Through Female Eyes," *Shipmates* (Vol. 8 No. 12), 36.
13. André Sobocinski, "Angels of the Airfields: Navy Air Evacuation Nurses of World War II," *Naval Historical Foundation*, 9 May 2013, available at <http://www.navyhistory.org/2013/05/angels-of-the-airfields-navy-air-evacuation-nurses-ww2/>.
14. Laurie Johnston, "American Fighters on Okinawa Astounded by Sight of Pretty Navy Nurse on Plane," *The Honolulu Advertiser*, 21 April 1945.